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The Making of America's China Policy

by David Horowitz

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IT WAS A FRUSTRATING DAY for James Reston, vice-president of the *New York Times* and minister without portfolio for America's journalistic mandarinat. Landing in Peking on July 12 with the thought of perhaps claiming new diplomatic territory as well as scoring a journalistic coup; he was told by the head of the information service of China's foreign ministry that Henry Kissinger had just left Peking and, it would shortly be announced, President Nixon would visit the People's Republic of China next spring. It was at this moment ("or so it now seems," Reston later wrote) that he experienced the first stab of pain in his side that would land him in the hospital for an emergency appendectomy the next day.

Before leaving New York, Reston had received a letter from Dr. Oliver McCoy, president of the China Medical Board, an institution John D. Rockefeller had created to run the medical college he had built there in 1916 and which was nationalized by the Communist government thirty-five years later. Dr. McCoy told Reston that if he should happen to notice a "large group of buildings with green tiled roofs not far from the southeast corner to inquire what those were." The old medical college had now become the Anti-Imperialist hospital, and it was in this unlikely setting that Reston had the consolation of at least being the first member of the American establishment to receive acupuncture treatments in the new China.

If such ironies dogged Reston's trip, they were also present in the larger drama that had been played out two days earlier amidst sumptuous 17-course dinners. For Henry Kissinger—the man who masterminded Nixon's new diplomacy in China and scooped James Reston—had once been the foreign policy advisor of the President's arch-rival for control of the Republican Party, Nelson Rockefeller. He was a strange *alter ego* to bear the tidings of American "friendship" which was being offered after twenty years of unrelenting official hostility by President Richard Nixon. And Richard Nixon was himself an unlikely president to be

making the offer. For this was the man who, in the words of Reston's *Times*, had "led the political clamor of the China lobby to ostracize the Chinese Communists from the community of 'peace-loving' nations" two decades ago and had earned spurs in the McCarthy purges by baiting the China experts who were then urging no greater accommodation to the revolutionary government than that for which Kissinger's secret mission had now set the stage.

These unexpected juxtapositions and ironic turns at the surface of policy are no mere coincidences. By their very incongruity, they suggest the presence of deeper continuities underlying Nixon's new approach toward the mainland. For despite sharp tactical lurches and even unforeseen veerings off course, there are few areas where the significant patterns of policy and personnel have been more stable in their way than in the field of China affairs. Nixon's new gesture, which looks almost impulsive and shrewdly tied to such political events as the 1972 election, has in fact been a bipartisan strategic planning assumption for a long time now among those who have always determined America's posture toward China. The *Times* itself pinpoints 1966 as the moment when Nixon realized that "no future American policy in Asia could succeed unless it came 'urgently to grips with the reality of China.'" All that was left to the White House quarterback was to choose the right political moment: "And just as his popularity at home dipped to a new low, with the Vietnam controversy swirling anew all around him and the North Vietnamese pressing for a quick and final deal to drive him out of Saigon before the end of 1971, Mr. Nixon lobbed the long one."

[CHINA AND THE AMERICAN EMPIRE]

SINCE THE CLOSING OF THE CONTINENTAL frontier at the end of the 19th century, China has occupied a special place in the self-conception of an American world role. Many historians have even designated America's subsequent global expansion as the pursuit